



“Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and truth.” 1 John 3:18

This Lenten Devotional is a gift of sharing. It is from our congregation to our congregation.

The idea of this devotional came about from conversations leading up to Pastor Carl Utley’s sabbatical to Chiapas, Mexico. By receiving our grant from the Lilly Endowment’s National Clergy Renewal Program, our congregation has been given the opportunity to explore mission and service possibilities in both Mexico and Oak Ridge. The Mission and Service Core Ministry thought that by sharing experiences of how we’ve seen God at work through both serving and being served, we could grow closer as a congregation. Our hope during this Lenten Season is that we will all be encouraged by each other’s experiences to seek out that special place where we can love our neighbors “with actions and truth.”

Peace and Blessings,
ORPC Mission and Service Core Ministry
February 2012

Cover designed by Jessica Troeger.

Wednesday February 22, 2012 – Ash Wednesday

A Mighty Friendship

John 15:15 - "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." (NIV)

Dr. Frank Harrington was pastor at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta from 1971 until his promotion to the Church Triumphant in 1999. I was fortunate to hear him preach for 9 years. As I remember it, he closed every Sunday service with this quote that still echoes in my head:

"While others have called you servants, He has named you friends. In the strength of that mighty friendship, go forth to serve in the Master's name until we meet again."

It is based on John 15:15, which has become my favorite passage. At some point, I realized these words must be significant for the pastor of a 12,000-member church to have repeated them each week to his congregation. Of all the verses in the Bible, why did he choose that one as the basis for his charge to group of largely affluent, successful people for their mission in the world? They were more likely to be the ones in charge instead of being "servants." I can never exactly know why he chose it, but I can make a guess based on my own experience.

The world wants to make us servants. We think that our striving will free us and make us masters of our own destinies but it often works the other way. We start climbing the ladder and work harder so we don't have to answer to "the man." Yet no matter how high we rise, it seems there is there is always someone making demands. Worldly success starts to generate its own set of demands. We seek material well-being, technology, and leisure activities, thinking those will set us free. Then we can become cogs in the wheel of the pursuit of happiness. Even family, civic, and church responsibilities can begin to feel like

burdens. At times, we may feel like everyone expects something and there is no way we can please all or even one of them. The rules of the game keep changing. Just when we think we are in charge of our situation, we realize it is in charge of us.

Jesus offers a different way. He does not use his authority to make our lives difficult. Instead he uses it to free us. He calls us friends. He wants to share himself and his Father with us. He guides us to do what is truly in our best interest because he knows what we need. He will stick with us through thick and thin, while others will leave us high and dry. Most of us have many acquaintances we might call friends. In reality, the number of "true friends" is often much smaller. Those are the friends with whom we have shared both happiness and sadness, where the relationship has endured through peaks and valleys, and where we can start a conversation one year and pick up the next year without missing a beat. Jesus is a friend like that, and much more. In John 15:13 he tells us "greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." That is a mighty friendship indeed.

Shaw Kenion

Thursday February 23, 2012

Matthew 18:1-7

I, like many others, work in a corporate setting where money, power, and greed tend to corrupt many, creating a lack of humility and a big sense of entitlement. It is truly all about doing what you need to in order to “get ahead”. It is hard to find many people with Christian beliefs.

I joined a local rotary club in Greensboro a few years ago in hopes of meeting like-minded business people with whom I may be able to “network” with. What I found was something quite different. I have seen first hand what good can be done through the many youth programs, Project Rebuild, Potters House, and a multitude of other community service activities. This has become, for me, a true understanding of what it means to be a humble servant.

I compare this to the passage in Matthew 18:1-7. Like the corporate world, the disciples are trying to determine who is the best among them. The disciples are envisioning a kingdom where Jesus will be like other kings and he will have all the riches that go along with it. Jesus, on the other hand, is describing how to be a part of his kingdom in heaven, not earth, and living our lives as humble servants.

By living as humble servants, it enables us to focus on what matters most, our relationship with Jesus. It also allows us to see that life is about the journey, not what we accumulate along the way.

Our heavenly father, thank you for teaching us to be your humble servants. Please help us to truly appreciate your grace and what you sacrificed for us. In Christ name we pray, Amen

Chris Hodgin

Friday February 24, 2012

Mistakes

Lent is a time for reflection, rededication, and repentance. All of us make mistakes. We are not proud of them. The thing about mistakes is that those are the things we remember. We don't always remember the good things that happened to us or the things that we do right. Sometimes we get so caught up that these mistakes actually bring us down and can be hurtful or regretful. I recently heard someone refer to this particular passage, so I went to re-read it and to try to gain any understanding I could from it. I now love these verses.

Lamentations 3:19-23

***The thought of my affliction and my homelessness
is wormwood and gall!***

***My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.***

***But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:***

***The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
His mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.***

These verses remind me that we all make mistakes, and a lot of them we remember for a very long time. But when we reflect on them, one thing matters more than anything: God's redemption and mercy. We get brought down by our sin and our failures, and then all we focus on is forgiveness. We want so badly to be forgiven and seen in a good light when we should really be thanking God for his everlasting love and mercy every day. *"His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."*

Laura Davis

Saturday February 25, 2012

"Just Do It!"

I remember a few years ago, seeing urgent requests going out for volunteers to help with Lowe's Food pick-up for Urban Ministries. I guess the request stayed on my heart and I wrestled with it for a couple of weeks. I tried to think of all the reasons that I couldn't do it.

One particular morning - driving to work, I was still struggling with it. As I sat at a stoplight, I felt in my heart that God was telling me (just like Nike) - to just do it Marion!

I talked with my boss about it since it was to be on Thursdays - when I would normally be at work and he was fine with me doing this. Doing the pick up usually puts me at work about an hour behind, but it has never been a problem. Thankfully, he believes in helping others as well! One of my co-workers that lives in Oak Ridge filled in for me one day - and now we have recruited her to be part of the monthly pick up schedule!

After picking up the food and delivering -- I spend the time driving from Urban Ministries to work in prayer.

I pray for the homeless and also ask God to let the food that I delivered to help nourish their bodies, and also their hearts and their spirits.

I then spend time in prayer thanking God for all of my blessings that come to mind when doing this:

Thankful for the opportunity to serve God and others

Thankful that I am physically able to do the delivery

Thankful that I have a car that can get me from Lowe's to Urban Ministries

Thankful that I have a boss that allows me to do this

Thankful for my home and the food that my family and I have to eat.

This has really been such a blessing to me, to be able to serve. It truly is more blessed to give than receive and I am thankful for the opportunity and thankful that God told me to ***Just Do It!***

"In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

Acts 20:35 NIV

Marion Collins

Monday February 27, 2012

Cracked Pots

A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on the ends of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water.

At the end of the long walk from the stream to the house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to his house.

Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you. I have been able to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house.

Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts, the pot said.

The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you've watered them.

For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house.

Moral:

Each of us has our own unique flaws. We're all cracked pots. But it's the cracks and flaws we each have that make our lives together so very interesting and rewarding. You've just got to take each person for what they are, and look for the good in them. Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape. Remember to appreciate all the different people in your life! Blessings to all my crackpot friends/relatives.

Isaiah 29:16 You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "He did not make me"? Can the pot say of the potter, "He knows nothing"?

Isaiah 64:8 Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Jeremiah 18:1-6 This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord; "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. He the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."

Romans 9:20-21 But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

II Corinthians 4:7 But we have this treasure (Jesus) in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

We are not perfect vessels--each of us has our own set of unique flaws. But if we are committed to being used by the Lord, He will fill us (the vessel) with His power and uniquely bless the world around us,

using the particular kind of vessel we are. Our imperfections can be tools to do a special work if we place them in His hands. He can take any handicap or any heart wound and turn it into a positive--a way to relate to needs in others.

The cracked pot became a watering jar and flowers grew up. God knows how to use each of us. Instead of feeling shame over our flaws or using them as an excuse, we can give them to the Lord to use.

Along with that, He is the Creator, the Potter. We are the vessels, the clay He has created. All of us at one time or another have wished we were different -- maybe prettier, taller, better hair, younger, smarter, stronger or a more exciting personality! But I think the Bible teaches that we are what God wants us to be and He has allowed us to be as we are so that we can be used in a special way for others. Strengths and flaws alike should be given to God for His use. Instead of comparing ourselves to others and their accomplishments, we need to trust God to use us as He wills. Don't be ashamed of what God has given you. Instead ask God to show you how to use your traits to be of service in God's work. As I search for my purpose in life, I need to realize that what God has in mind for me may differ from what I have in mind!

Kathy Costner

Tuesday February 28, 2012

Lent

It's NOT about red meat...

It's NOT about chocolate...

It's NOT about jobs...

It's NOT about school...

It's NOT about the fluff...

It IS about Jesus sacrificing His life for us.

It IS about you only have one life.

It IS about God is eternal.

It IS about prioritizing...

It IS about imagining...

It IS about creating...

It IS about renewing...

ORPC Youth Fellowship 2011-2012

Wednesday February 29, 2012

Surrender

This word sounds so sweet and tender doesn't it? In a perfect world, we would take every bone thrown our way and before we did anything else, we would just "Give it to the Lord". I'm sure we cannot count on our fingers and toes the amount of times we've heard that phrase. "Surrender to the Lord. Give it to God. He'll take care of it." There is no falsehood in that whatsoever but if it's so right and so true, why is it so hard to do? This is important to remember all the time, but especially meaningful as we prepare for the greatest sacrifice from Jesus- himself.

If you're anything like me you like to have the control. You like to take life by the horns and guide it into the path in which you've always dreamed or schemed but where is the Lord in that? He gave his own life on the cross because he loves you and me more than we could ever fathom. He came here so that we do not have to wander through life alone- with just us "sinful folk." It's a huge blessing because the very things we feel we're in control of are many times the things that don't turn out the way we hoped or planned. The Lord is breaking us of ourselves. We're meant to be more than ourselves and live for the glory of his Kingdom—not our own.

What areas of your life are you having trouble surrendering to the Most High God? Why do you think you're having such trouble? Really think about that today. Sometimes it's hard to recognize them all at once because we're so used to being in the daily grind and carrying these things around with us. It's no big deal. We're used to it....but we shouldn't be.

What are you holding back? He wants all of us....every little dark and twisty, happy go-lucky inch of you and me. In the very act of surrendering it all to him, it is then when we truly feel/see/hear the essence of what He had in mind and what He has in mind is much more rich and inviting than the itty-bitty plans we have for ourselves. We're

small and He is enormous! We are weak and He is strong! He knows it all and we know nothing of the greatness he has in mind.

Proverbs 23:26: My son, give me your heart and let your eyes keep to my ways.

Halie Smith

Thursday March 1, 2012

It's not about me!

Often I wonder when I will feel like I am good enough for God or worthy of His love and forgiveness. Over and over again I come up with the same answer, Never! Sometimes I think we forget that there is nothing we can do to deserve what God has given us in His Son, Christ Jesus. Something I have to tell myself over and over again that's worth repeating is "It's not about me". When it comes to my salvation, "It's not about me.", it's about Jesus. He is my interceder. When it comes to being good enough for God, "It's not about me.", it's about Jesus. He has washed me clean. Another good thing about this saying, besides being a comfort when I am feeling bad about myself, it can also be a motivator when I am feeling uncomfortable about something God is calling me to do. For example, I feel called to witness to someone I think needs to hear about Jesus, "It's not about me", it's about Jesus. I am called to spread His good news. Or I feel the need to step outside my comfort zone to help someone I might normally not even notice, "It's not about me.", it's about Jesus. I am called to be His hands and feet. Finally, when someone has hurt my feelings or embarrassed me and I feel myself getting angry, I try to remind myself "It's not about me.", it's about Jesus. I am called to forgive so my Heavenly Father will forgive me. When I meet my Savior face to face, I won't have to say this anymore. But until then, in order for me to try to live as he did, I will just keep reminding myself, "It's not about me!"

Ray Wallace

Friday March 2, 2012

In the opening words of his letter to the people in the church at Ephesus, Paul describes his recipients as "saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus." Here in two words Paul summarizes what it means to be a Christian.

The first word he uses is *saints*--a word too often misunderstood. Many assume that a saint is someone who has lived a particularly exemplary and spiritual life, someone who by their actions has earned the title by which they are known. But that is exactly the opposite of the true meaning of *saint*. That word neither says nor implies anything meritorious about an individual, it simply means that the person has been set apart, chosen, pulled out of line. The initiative for saint-making is not with the saint, it is with the one who calls. The word is not recognition of extraordinariness; rather it is recognition that a gift has been bestowed. Saints are, in the true sense, very ordinary people who have been invited into something new and extraordinary.

The second word is *faithful*, and it does say something special about a person. That specialness is that they are living, or are trying to live, in a manner that shows they understand the great worth of the gift they have been given, a manner consistent with the name *saint*. It means that the person realizes they have been set apart, and set apart for a purpose, and is trying to live in a manner that fits the call and accomplishes the purpose.

When Paul used those two words *saints* and *faithful* he was speaking to some in Ephesus, but today those words speak to us as well. When we become members of a church, or when we simply identify with a Christian body, we are making a profound statement. We are saying that we understand that by God's grace, without any effort of our own, our broken relationship with God has been restored. We are saying that we have been given a second chance, a new life, we have been *born again*. And we are claiming that the nearly infinite possibilities for healthier relationships with others, for a sense of peace and purpose, for a life that counts, has been given to us--and given freely. It says that we understand that our deepest needs, things we could never meet,

have been met by God in Jesus Christ. But that identification and participation also says that we are trying to live out the implications of that new life, that we are dedicated to living a life shaped by thanksgiving, by gratitude, by faithfulness to the one who has gifted us. It says that we are willing to stand up and stand out for the one who loved us so much that he died for us. It says that we are trying to live up to the title which we could never earn but with which we have been gifted, that is *saint*.

Have you begun to realize what amazing gifts you were given when Christ called you and set you apart? If you want a reminder just read the first chapter of Ephesians and be awed by these gifts. And then how is the way you are living displaying your gratitude for those gifts? Christian ethics is not a life lived in order to gain something, it is a life lived in response to what God has already given. Belonging to Christ is the supreme gift of all creation...and it calls for the extreme life of gratitude. Being a *saint* is an awesome honor, and being *faithful* is its call.

Will Ackles

Saturday March 3, 2012

Abundance

"For I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened: But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality."

2 Corinthians 8, verses 13 and 14 KJV

Six months ago, I was asked to house, feed, and care for two teenage boys, brothers, who are no relation to me. One is my son's classmate and friend. They might have otherwise been homeless or unable to live together while their mother is living in a shelter. No timetable was given for the length of this care, and no money, other than a portion of the mother's food stamps, was promised. While I could not, in good conscience, say no, I certainly knew that, when I said yes, this would be a burden on my already limited finances and time, not to mention additional wear and tear on my truck, my furniture, and my other possessions.

But God has the most clever ways of teaching us that our knowledge is anything but certain, that money, time, and material possessions are anything but ours, and that what we often perceive as burdens are, in actuality, gifts to meet our undiscovered needs, the secret "supply" for our latent "want," the counter-weight that brings balance and equality to our lives.

Tony Troeger

Monday March 5, 2012

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:13

When I was 14, my mom was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. At age 16, she died and my life turned upside down, my heart and my spirit were broken. For a long time, I questioned, “*God, why my mother?*” “*God, why are you punishing me?*” In 1965, few friends said the word cancer and even fewer felt comfortable hearing my sad story. I needed to talk about what had happened and my hurt was so deep that I didn’t really believe God was listening or could comfort me. My faith was uprooted by my mother’s death and I lived my young life striving to believe that maybe I could, “...do all things through Christ who strengthens me?” God was patient and encouraged me to grow in mind and spirit. Gradually, I realized that all of my life He intentionally surrounded me with special people who shared His strength and whose lives reflected God’s love. Each one embraced me, offered emotional support, and reassured me, even when I retold my story! God and his son Jesus lifted me up during my weakest moments, held my heart and soul, and blessed me with faithful friends.

As a result of my loss, for years I heard God’s “still quiet voice” calling me to eventually work with children who suffered the loss of a loved one. Teaching first graders for thirty-eight years became my passion and my mission. My goals were not only to educate young children, but to offer positive opportunities for encouragement and to affirm whatever children had experienced in their young lives. After retiring in 2009, my new mission is a unique program of Hospice and Palliative Care of Greensboro, Kids Path. My volunteer work at Kids Path allows me to work directly with children of loss. I know my strength comes from the Lord. He has blessed me with courage to offer a listening ear, an understanding heart, and to be a source of comfort for a child who needs a faithful friend.

On my good days, “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*” Some days, God and I have to work harder ... I am truly a work in progress!

Frances Jackson

Tuesday March 6, 2012

I sent you...

There is a marvelous story of a man who once stood before God, his heart breaking from the pain and injustice in the world. "Dear God," he cried out, "look at all the suffering, the anguish and distress in the world. Why didn't you send help?" God responded, "I did send help. I sent you."

David Wolfe

This story was discovered by OPRC mission travelers in late 2006, 3 months after Katrina hit New Orleans. It was 'mildewed-glued' to the principal's desk in an elementary school located near a demolition site where we were working.

During one of our breaks, we ventured to what had been this newly built, state of the art school, only to find it in complete ruin, with water marks over half way to the ceiling. Working there in this mess, I wondered 'what was the point, what good are we really doing here'? The city was all but 'wiped off the map', the silence there was unforgettable - no birds or other animals, dead trees, and abandoned buildings, each of which marked with red spray paint, a sight that had been broadcast 24/7 on our TVs; needless to say there were few people left there, and the smell of rotting everything was indescribable.

But finding that mildewed piece of paper, that story on that trip, in that city, at that moment...it changed everything. Its discovery was, without a doubt, surely meant to be by God, and it was God's message. I have often wondered how the story's meaning would have been different, if I had simply read it in a magazine, or seen it online while sitting in my easy chair at home. Surely I would have read it, but to have had it placed in my life... my hands, as it was, by God at that time, I knew I had 'gotten it', understood its meaning and how God was using me. That was and will always be one of the most meaningful 'finds' in my life.

So many times as I have sought God, I expected Him in a way that 'worked' for me. I hoped for in his response in a clear, concise message (preferably email, and one 100 words or less please), from Him but deep down, we know it doesn't work that way. Often times God's message to us isn't always as obvious as that one in New Orleans was for me and the other travelers, but it is always there, nonetheless.

Sue Smith

Wednesday March 7, 2012

It was April 7th, 2005 when Maddy Jane's skull was fractured by a daycare worker and our world was turned upside down. At 2:30am, the doctor finally confirmed what we could not imagine. Our 4 month old baby girl had a skull fracture. For Chris, he knew it was by God's grace this fragile baby had survived a blow to the head that went untreated for hours. Chris saw God's mercy quickly and clearly. I did not. I was shocked and in denial. I had no idea the gravity of the situation and how much I would later rely on God and his strength to get us through. There is no other reason but God's grace that Maddy is with us today. But that isn't how God touched me through this event. Forgiveness is something I have struggled with all of my life. This was the ultimate test for me. How do we forgive someone who hurt or precious baby? How do we set aside the anger and grief and betrayal we felt and go on? How do we trust Max, Andie May and Maddy with anyone ever again? It took years for me to learn what God was telling me. I thought if I forgave someone, it meant I accepted what they did and sort of gave in to them. I have since learned that forgiveness means you know it is God that bears the burden of judgment, not me. I cannot decide what acts deserve forgiveness and what are too great to forgive. God forgives, and I am called to do the same.

Janet Farrell told me about a website, www.griefshare.com, after my mom passed away. I get a daily email guiding me through this process of grieving and really it helps with many different aspects of the Christian's life. Day 104 really hit home for me. Thank you to Janet for being such a pillar of God's Love!

From www.griefshare.com
Emotional Safety Valve #2: Forgive
Day 104

Forgiveness is getting your heart right with God by making the choice to forgive others and by receiving His forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean you are relieving someone of responsibility for his or her actions. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean you trust that person. Forgiveness is the act of letting God's love flow through you.

Think about the above definition for a moment.

Doug Easterday says, "You're not alleviating responsibility from anyone by forgiving them. You are transferring it to where it really belongs and that's with God. They will answer to God someday, but if you're requiring them to answer to you, then you have as big a problem as they do."

Forgiveness is obedience to God.

"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times'" (Matthew 18:21-22).

Lord, it is only by Your power that I can forgive. Keep me from destroying myself with unforgiveness. Amen.

PS: Maddy is perfectly fine with no repercussions that we know of. Maybe a bit sassier than she would have been and certainly tougher, but happy & healthy none the less!

Kelly Toney

Thursday March 8, 2012

Minor miracles

Of the many truths we are taught as Christians, two were demonstrated and confirmed for me last year.

The first truth: God performs miracles in our lives on a daily basis. The second: God works through man. The following is my witness of these two truths.

As a mom, one of my tasks this past year was to cart my son around to several vendors and craftsmen that had supplies, or knowledge needed for my son to create his Eagle project. Since this was *his* project, I would accompany him into the business, but would hang back, letting him negotiate the meeting. When we entered the showroom of the first vendor, my teenage son filled with fragile confidence approached what seemed to be the only employee in the building. What I saw in this vendor's face made my heart sink. His expression was completely closed and he had an air of irritation and indifference about him. My son introduced himself as the vendor shifted impatiently from foot to foot, scowling. As I prepared in my mind how I would pick up the pieces of my son's broken confidence, a gentlemen appeared. He stepped between my son and the vendor saying, "I'll take care of this". [Minor miracle #1: enter the conduit of caring from out of nowhere].

As I stood at a distance watching, I saw the expression of the new vendors face go through many changes. At first he was open but reserved. He challenged my son on project details and asked many questions. Finally he features soften ever so subtly as he took my son under his wing and began to teach him. [Minor miracle #2: the unexpected mentor answering a need].

He then suggested that my son go pick out the exact materials he would like to use. As my son stepped away the man motion for me to come to him. "When he is ready to purchase the products, have him come to

me and only me, and I will take care of him." [Minor miracle #3: the giver of unexpected gifts].

I have tried as part of my daily prayers and actions of gratitude to open my eyes and recognize the minor miracles God sends me every day. This event provided perfect practice.

Back in the car, I shared with my son what I had observed. He agreed with me that the situation turned dramatically to his favor and, he was certain his rescue came from a very special place. We both agreed that recognizing a big miracle is easy, but that you have to fine tune your sight to see the many miracles that fall like dust particles you cannot see until you look *up* into the *light*.

Still in the parking lot we discussed the second truth that God works through man. We felt this was demonstrated on two levels. The obvious being the vendor who became the vessel of our three miracles. The less obvious was this. We agreed that God creates and works through man on earth. But we have come to believe He works through men and women who have gone home. We believe that He gives us each gifts, talents, and freewill which when we go home we take with us. We also believe those who have passed can exercise freewill and decide if they wish to continue using their talents to help those left behind. On that project trip and the many others which followed, we saw the same kind of minor miracles happen. For my son and I there is no doubt that Mike Farrell continues to render his best gift--leading people to love and to give to each other.

Dee Angermeier

Friday March 9, 2012

I am scheduled to preach on Ash Wednesday. The question that I've most often heard preachers ask is how to get people to consider their sinfulness in that service. We often have 60-70 people who come from pancakes on Shrove Tuesday. Barely half will attend Ash Wednesday. "Syrup to pancakes" goes over a whole lot easier than "ashes to ashes."

So I had an introductory meeting with the text yesterday and Isaiah 58:1-12 didn't even talk about our ashy selves. What Isaiah 58 talked about was our serving selves. You see, the people of Israel were frustrated. They were back in Israel from exile. They were worshipping again in the place they considered God's dwelling. They did all the right things—prayed the right prayers, sang the right music, made the right sacrifices. But instead of getting better, of growing and thriving as the people of God, they continued to flounder. They complained to God—a lot. We're doing all the things we're supposed to? What is it you want?

And, as usual, God replies—though probably not in the reassuring way the people wanted. God says I don't care about all the things you think are most important to me. Good for you, worshipping. But which of your slaves did you leave at home to work while you came here? Good for you, sacrificing. But who did you leave hungry to pay for the perfect dove or lamb? Good for you, singing my praises. But who have you oppressed this week to get ahead, to become an important part of the synagogue?

Being aware of our mortality, our human-ness, is a critical aspect of our faith. We should be reminded we are not God. But if our worship practice is focused solely on our navels, wallowing in the depths of despair or worshipping so God will feed and care for us, we have missed the point.

God speaks bluntly. Letting the oppressed go free, feeding the hungry, meeting the needs of the afflicted, stopping the pointing of fingers and the speaking of evil...then "our light shall rise in the darkness and our gloom be like the midday." Our fundamental call is service to others,

and not just polite, surface, handouts. Our call is to change lives...ending hunger and affliction and evil and homelessness.

It's no wonder we prefer pancakes.

Beth Utley

Saturday March 10, 2012

Day Five

***God spoke: "Swarm, Ocean, with fish and all sea life!
Birds, fly through the sky over Earth!"***

***God created the huge whales,
all the swarm of life in the waters,
And every kind and species of flying birds.***

God saw that it was good.

***God blessed them: "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Ocean!
Birds, reproduce on Earth!"***

It was evening, it was morning—

Day Five.

Genesis 1: 20-23 (The Message)

I know God didn't have any slacker creation days. Light and dark – sure, it had to be done. Day two's physical and chemical miracles of water and air made the world amazingly diverse. Who but God could envision the possibilities in those two newly created spaces? The boundary of this fantastic separation became the focus for many of earth's creatures. I think day three was a fun interlude for God - a day to get a little dirty. The plant world is a testament to both God's providence and artistry. Fields of sunflowers, sequoia forests, and duckweed covered ponds have inspired many human gardeners to mirror their Creator. I think day four was probably technically very interesting for God. Distant stars, planets, galaxies and the secrets of a mind-blowingly large and expanding universe have provided challenging study for humankind's most brilliant scientists. But, day five is my personal favorite.

From my earliest memories, I've been drawn to God's day five creations: fish, birds, insects, reptiles, amphibians. I could (and still can) spend hours wading the tidal flats of Onslow and Carteret Counties. My family will attest to my fascination with fish of any kind. We slow down or stop at most river crossings, sometimes spending long minutes just watching trout hang in the current. Our family hikes and camping trips are defined by our

discoveries: the cecropia cocoon, a new salamander, and the starfish feeding in a tidal pool. The animal kingdom is defined by interesting variety, amazing complexity and great beauty ...truly God's gifts to the day six creatures.

Yes, I believe God speaks most clearly through the special revelation of the written and Living Word. However, I also find God in the general revelation of his awe-inspiring creation. I recommend you take extra time this spring to see God's day five creations. Share His joy in declaring, "it is good."

Prayer: Creator God, Help us to see You in the world around us. Show us Your world outside our homes, cars and computers. Help us to experience You through the creatures of the air and sea. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Brian Swierenga

Monday March 12, 2012

Change

Our oldest daughter was a high school senior and I was trying to prepare myself for a bit of change knowing that she would soon leave our nest and head off to college. That same year my father was diagnosed with leukemia and passed away within months. Brian's worksite was closed down and our family had to move across the state to a new house and new community. So many changes happening in such a short time.

We had lived in Holland, Michigan for 17 years. Moving and changing was not on our radar. I was the director of a mentoring program at our church and the coordinator for our church's girls club. We were deeply connected to family, church, school and friends.

I wondered what God was doing. I wondered if I could handle all this change. Maybe Sarah and Abraham had similar thoughts when God told them to leave the place where they were living and go to a land God would show them. As time passed and we lived through the changes, I realized God was in my new community too. God was with my daughter in college, with my father in heaven, with my kids in their new school communities and with me in all the changes. He is in all places and in all times. He doesn't change but provides the security I need when I go through changes.

"...he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand."

Psalm 40: 2b

Jill Swierenga

Tuesday March 13, 2012

I was totally surprised at my reaction the morning I was preparing to leave for Mexico. Something I had been so sure of before suddenly filled me with fear. I was in panic, almost survival mode on the way to the airport. What was happening? This wasn't the joyous, meaningful sendoff I had hoped for. It was awkward, tearful, and I was...angry? I didn't know what was going on.

I read my Bible, the Gospel of Matthew, on the way to Houston from Greensboro, thinking that I would find peace in God's word, if I just kept reading it. By the time I got to Houston, I was recognizably myself again. By that evening I would have a brief moment in my husband's embrace and feel "home."

It wasn't until a couple of days later that I realized what had happened. I had not let go. I let go of the fear the morning of Mike's funeral when I told Brad, "I have to go to Mexico," and he hugged me and said, "I know." But, I had not let go of everything else. I had not let go of feeling like I wasn't giving enough to God, that I wasn't pious enough for the likes of Mexico.

I sat on top of the Bible college, the roof is a favorite escape for those trying to get some peace, and I just thought it would be a good idea to find God there, since that seemed like what all the people that I considered to be my spiritual leaders kept doing. If they were in communion with God there, maybe He would come to me too.

I was tearfully shocked when He did show up, and continued to show up the whole week and after that. Here, I thought I was going through the motions of Mexico, when in fact; the motions are what carried me to God.

I wrote this on top of the Bible College my second day in Mexico:

*Be still and know that I am God.
I will bring the wind to your face,
The tear to your eye,
The stillness to your mind.
If you need comfort,
I will bring it.
If you need peace,
You have all there is to give.*

*The wind was Me,
Your breath is Me,
And your prayer is in Me.
You need no more,
So take no more,
But give instead.*

*I wanted all of this for you.
All of the beauty,
All of the smiles,
The friendship,
The silence,
The tears,
And even the fear.*

*The more you feel,
The more you know me.
The more you know me,
The more you feel me.
The more you feel me,
The more you share me.*

*You need no more,
So take no more,
But give instead.*

I shared this with Janet while we were in Mexico, and she said, "That could be used as a devotion." She sure is smart, or doggone close to God, or both....

Heather DeDona

Wednesday March 14, 2012

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God.”

1 Corinthians 10:31-32

We'd been in Tzajala for several days and each morning, the men of the village walked their wives to our worksite. Some of the men would say “good-bye” and keep walking down the dirt road to board a cattle truck taxi which would take them to their jobs. The other men would stay with us to repair and expand the floor of their church. All of the women, however, went into the dirt-floored kitchen where they cooked beans and made tortillas for our lunch and dinner.

Every day, I had looked longingly into that kitchen trying to work up the courage to ask the women to teach me how to make tortillas. The kitchen itself was smoky and furnished with only a few benches and a couple of tables. A big pot of black beans simmered over an open fire on the floor. Some of the women made tortillas while two others stood beside a second fire cooking them on a piece of sheet metal. A couple of young children played quietly on the floor while the women chatted and laughed as they went about their tasks. The kitchen wasn't much to look at, but to me, it seemed that an ongoing worship service was taking place in this makeshift sanctuary.

Finally, one of the summer interns, Lora and I went in to ask them to teach us. My English is interspersed with only a few Spanish words and they only spoke their native language, Tzeltal, but through pointing and smiles, we were able to communicate. The matron of the group handed both of us a large pinch of cornmeal dough. She motioned for us to make it into a ball like hers and then, she taught us how to press it to the appropriate thinness and cook it to the perfect doneness. She made it look easy, but I failed. She smiled at me, took my pathetic first attempt from the press, balled it up and handed it back to me. Again I tried and again I failed. I lost count of the number of times we went back and forth like this, but eventually, with her gentle

encouragement, I got it right and my tortilla made it to the fire and then to the stack of tortillas we ate for dinner that night.

It's easy to get disillusioned by the redundancy of everyday tasks, and sometimes, it's easy to skimp on my efforts because I know that tomorrow I'll be doing it again. It would have been easy for that precious woman to have let me keep making botched tortillas . . . they were only tortillas, after all. But she didn't. Instead, she encouraged me not to be perfect, but to do my best.

Rebecca Aydelette

Thursday March 15, 2012

What is Mission to me? It is the thing that when I am doing it, I feel I am what God truly intended me to be.

When we talk of the Parts of the Body... I have hands to feed, arms to lift, shoulders to be laid upon, a back to bear the weight, legs to carry you and I, feet to take me where I am called, ears to hear the truth and eyes to witness the beauty of the Spirit.

When we talk of a Cross to bear... I have a stone to carry, a journey to take, a path to travel, a hand to hold, a shoulder to hug, a commitment to fulfill, a message to voice, a treasure to share, a joy to share, a God and Savior to give thanks and praise.

There are days that I do not live up to what God fully intended me to be and I ask for your prayers.

My prayer for you is that you find the Part you are intended to be and bear your Cross with joy.

Phillip Aydelette

Friday March 16, 2012

Growing up in the Baptist church “mission” meant the Lottie Moon offering to send missionaries to the heathen in far-off climes. It was personal only to the extent of what need or treat we might do without to add a mite to the annual offering.

Mission became a personal thing with me at ORPC when I became involved in the Tabitha and Urban Ministries - and even more so when I joined a mission trip to Chiapas, Mexico. The trip challenged me physically but enriched my life beyond measure to be a part of an ongoing journey with folks of a different culture, of a different language, but with equal hunger to “pay it forward” in mission and service.

It is not necessary to go to a foreign country, or even to another neighborhood. Every day we have an opportunity at home to give a smile, a hug, send a card, make a call, fix a meal -- and if that is not service, I have been listening to the wrong drummer.

Marie Armstrong

Saturday March 17, 2012

I guess for me, when my family felt God's presence is when Robert had a bleed at the base of his skull. We didn't know if Robert was going to live or die because of the seriousness of this condition. The doctors said that usually people don't survive this type episode. I knew God had answered our prayers when He allowed my husband to live through such a helpless event. The doctors couldn't give him much relief due to the threat of a stroke and we were told that we had to be patient as his body would absorb the blood. As the weeks went by and as the blood traveled through his head, his vision was impaired, and as it went through the spine, severe back pain was realized.

God alone had made it possible for Robert to be alive today. We are so grateful for God's grace and peace that we all felt when Robert pulled through this uncommon ordeal.

God is Good... All the time!!

Barbara Rogers

Monday March 19, 2012

When it comes to sin, we often set ourselves up for defeat. We try to see how close we can get to moral failure or romantic involvement without doing anything wrong. Paul, however, tells us that is wrong. We are to foster a pure heart. This is meant to give the sincere Christian a timely warning about the dangers of sin. It is not to be played with, tested out, or carelessly ignored. Don't be satisfied with merely escaping any sin; stay away from sin's beginnings, from its first flickering flame and avoid all appearances of evil. We are quick to judge the sins of others, and equally quick to defend our own. Yet no sin is acceptable to God and so no sin should be downplayed by us. Every sin—whether public and noticeable or private and unnoticeable—must be avoided or battled. What about you? Are you flirting with sin, or are you shunning its appearance?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, have mercy on me, a sinner. I believe in you and that your word is true. Please Jesus, forgive me, for every sin I have ever committed or done in my heart, please Lord Jesus forgive me and come into my heart as my Lord and Savior today. I need you to be my Father and my friend. I give you my life and ask you to take full control from this moment on; In Jesus name. Amen.

Alex Rice

Tuesday March 20, 2012

We take so many things in life for granted not realizing that life can be taken from us in a moment. I experienced a close to death situation once, and because of that I feel much closer to God because of the love he had for me in my time of need, just as has always promised. Through the love of God all things are possible, without God we have nothing.

Robert Rogers

Strength

Think back to when you were children. Looking to the sky as you prayed, but realizing even though God and his Son are in heaven, they are always watching over us. They watch over us through thick and thin. So realize God will help you through everything. Even in the Bible Philippians 4:13 says, "I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me". So ask yourself in tough situations, do I trust God to help me through?

Wyatt Wallace

Wednesday March 21, 2012

Love in Action

Romans 12: 9-13 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Luke 17:10 So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty."

God, here I am, use me to glorify You! This has been a prayer of mine for a long time. Has God used me to further His glory? I know I have tried to listen to God's call to serve. Serving on several mission work groups at home, in other states, and in Mexico, I have seen His hand at work through the love of those serving with me, and from those I served. We shared our physical labor and our love for God with those we helped. It always amazed me that God had a way of giving me more spiritual and emotional growth than I gave to others. You see, I have learned, I cannot out give our God in serving others. Serving others with love is what Christ did and called us all, as Christians, to do for each other. Serving can be for a neighbor next door, someone down the street, people in our church, or even an organized mission work trip to some faraway place. It is the same in God's eyes. What is important to God is our sharing His love and mercy to all those around us where ever we are and in whatever way we can. We are blessed when others return His love.

Prayer: Dear God instill within me your love so deep that it over flows, and causes me to share it with those around me where ever I am so that your grace and mercy may abound. Amen

Focus point: Where can I show the love of God today?

Floyd Jackson

Thursday March 22, 2012

For even the son of God did not come to be served but to serve others and give his life to ransom for many.

Mark 10:45

What comes to mind when you think of service?

Do you think of going to Mexico on a mission trip or do you think about serving in a soup kitchen?

When I think of serving, the first thing that comes to mind is helping other people around me in my community.

Everybody seems to think that in order to make a big difference they have to go on a mission trip. If you can go on a mission trip, that's great. I went on my first mission trip to Mexico in 2010. It was one of the biggest spiritual growing weeks of my life and I can't wait to go back.

But one of the things that brings me closer to God on a weekly basis is volunteering at Horsepower, a therapeutic riding center for kids and adults with special needs.

If you are looking for a way to serve, find something that you're good at and then use your talents and gifts to glorify God. That's what service is to me. It's taking the time to give back what you have been blessed with.

Casey Aydelette

Friday March 23, 2012

Psalm 121

A song of ascents

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?**
- ² My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.**
- ³ He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;**
- ⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.**
- ⁵ The LORD watches over you—
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;**
- ⁶ the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.**
- ⁷ The LORD will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;**
- ⁸ the LORD will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.**

One Wednesday last Fall, I lost my debit card and driver's license between the store and home. When I realized they were lost, I began a frantic search. Thursday I looked everywhere I thought it could be. I went back to the store where I used it last, not there. I looked in the car I drove, not there. I looked on the ground around the car I drove, in my purse and coat pockets, laundry, couch, chairs...everywhere. Friday was rainy and very windy. I had to speak at a school meeting but planned to go right home to look for my cards. I told myself, find them today or you'll have to change your account info and go to the driver's license office...yuck. Yet for some reason, I felt compelled to stay at the meeting after I had given my report. There was a guest speaker that day

talking about the power of purposeful and specific prayer. I have always believed that although I am a child of God and am loved by Him, He has better things to do than listen to my very minor complaints or problems. But this speaker said God rejoices when His children come to Him no matter what the issue. I had never prayed for good weather, great hair or lost items. She said why not try? The meeting ended and I was driving home thinking about what I had just been told. Really? Pray for lost items? I grew up Catholic and felt a bit like my old neighbor who used to pray to St. Anthony for lost things. It didn't feel quite right but I asked God for patience and help to point me in the direction of my cards. When I turned onto my street, I realized the rain and wind had stopped. Branches and leaves were left behind by the wind, but the sun was out in all its glory. I pulled into my driveway and something caught my eye...2 things, actually. There, in the grass at the end of my driveway, each reflecting the sun's rays and gleaming, were my cards. No kidding. I just sat there with my mouth open, got out to investigate, and sure enough, I had found my long lost cards. Did the God reach down and place my cards there? I don't think so. Did he hear my prayers and open my eyes to what was in front of me all along? In so many ways, that's exactly what he did. Pray that God will open your eyes to His constant presence.

Julia Militello

Saturday March 24, 2012

Plan-B: God's Plan

“For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11

On my first mission trip to Mexico in 2002, I heard the Pablo say for the first of many times that there is “man’s plan” and “God’s plan”. I thought I understood it then and it felt all warm and fuzzy, but on April 28, 2011 God’s plan felt very confusing to me. It was the day that my precious soul mate was taken from this life into life everlasting. I was in shock for a long time, but I kept saying over and over again to everyone around me, “God has a plan”. I think I was saying it because I was trying hard to believe it. But why would His plan take away someone so dear to me who enjoyed life so much and who gave so freely of himself to lead others to Christ in his own quiet way by example? We were beginning our lives as “empty nesters” and quite honestly thrilled at the opportunity! We had been through so many challenges and also amazing adventures in our 30 years of marriage. I thought it was all planned out....or so I had planned!

God knows the number of our days. Michael believed that with his whole being and said many times, “when it’s your time, it’s your time”. Michael tested the theory and proved it true; he had cheated death on more than one occasion, leading me to know now that God has a plan for all of our lives. Our part in that plan is to be open and willing to seek God’s will for each of us individually and trust, now there’s a word, trust, that God knows us as only a creator can know us.

The blessing for me in this last year has been that I have been given the peace that His plan for me is ahead in each day that I trust Him more and more to lead me. Michael’s earthly journey is complete and he is in the presence of the saints and God his father. My journey is still being lived out each day as I learn to trust God in all things.

Janet Farrell

Monday March 26, 2012

My whole life, I've been hearing about Mexico from my parents, other family members, and my church family. I've heard, "It's great, you'll love it. It will change your life." And I knew that going on a mission trip would be good for you, but I wanted to find out for myself. I honestly felt like I was missing out by not going on this trip. I was getting tired of waiting to get to go.

However, when I found out that I was able to go, I had mixed emotions. As excited as I was, I was also worried I might not live up to everyone's expectations, and my worst fear – what if I don't get a life changer out of this just like most everyone else has?

So my group went to a little village called Guaquitepec. They didn't speak Spanish; they spoke the native language, Tzeltal. The first 3 days we were there, we settled in the church, put up our hammocks – things of that nature. We were helping to add on an addition to their church. So we dug lots of holes, mixed plenty of cement, and tied rebar. So that was the first 3 days, but I would really like to touch on the fourth day I was there...

It was about mid-morning, and we were taking a break after already working for about 2 ½ to 3 hours. Well Olivia and I looked over to where the Tzeltal women were, and we got curious. So we went over there and tried our best to communicate with them. And even though we could not understand a word they were saying, we got the hints asking if we wanted to get dressed up. We said, "Sure. What have we got to lose." So a couple of the women went to get the clothes – and by the way, these are one size fits all skirts and shirts. Well once they got back with the clothing, we changed and put on the traditional clothing they usually wear. And when these women were helping us change, you would've thought they were 7 year-old girls again playing dress-up. Smiles were plastered on all of their faces, and it seemed like they were having the time of their lives.

Well anyway, after we got the clothes on, it was time for the hair. In Guaquitepec, they have this interesting way of braiding their hair with bows all together. It was really cool. So when it came time for them to braid my hair, I had an audience. This village had never hosted white people before, much less a white person with blonde hair. All of them absolutely loved my hair! But anyway, when I was getting my hair braided – I swear I haven't ever felt anything more painful. They don't mess around when it comes to bows and braids!

So after we were all officially dressed up with hair, clothes and everything, it was picture time. After we took pictures, we just messed around, playing with the children and trying to talk to the women. And the kids were so intrigued by the cameras, so they were playing with them. But the weird thing for me about this picture is that I've never felt more comfortable with a group of strangers than that afternoon. Every single one of them just made us feel so welcomed, appreciated and loved. I really felt like God was working through all of us that day, and I really felt his presence that afternoon. That day probably summarizes why Mexico changed my life. It was THE highlight of my week.

Then the next morning me and a couple of others worked alongside the Tzeltal women in the kitchen, which was really cool. We pressed some tortillas, peeled chayote and carrots, and tried to make small talk. It was a really neat morning. That afternoon before we left the village we ate lunch and did a little communion with the people there. The communion was a lot less extravagant than most of us are used to but it was still awesome. One of the cool parts for me was doing the communion with the women who had served us all week. They finally sat down and we were all one body of Christ.

So when it came close to time to coming back to North Carolina, I had a lot to process. But that's okay. Over the week, I had surprisingly started to miss my brother and sister. Plus I missed my own bed and getting caught up on my sleep. But see the thing that surprised me in Mexico was that I cried a lot. Like a lot, a lot. And it's not like when you cry at home. There's a difference between regular tears and Mexico tears. With regular tears, you cry them when your heart gets broken, when

you laugh so hard you cry, or when you get in a fight with your best friend.

You cry Mexico tears when someone convinces you to eat a spoonful of the spiciest salsa ever! When you are overwhelmed by God's existence and love for all of us, or when you have to leave strangers who you've managed to fall deeply in love with.

I went into Chiapas Mexico as regular Bailey always texting and socializing. Had no idea what to expect of this trip! But I came back as Tzeltal Barbie Bailey, with a whole new perspective of things, and very aware of God's love and existence.

Bailey Morton
Mexico Sunday Sermon

Tuesday March 27, 2012

“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Matthew 28:20

This has been my favorite Bible verse for as long as I can remember. Like the famous footprints poem, it reminds us of God’s incredible promise that we *never* have to face the hardships of life alone. God is the rock and the strong tower that we can rely upon when we can no longer rely upon ourselves. However, I prefer to think of God as the rock more than the tower because although He does shelter and protect us, there are times when He must allow us to be completely exposed to the trials we are facing so that we may learn and grow stronger from the experience. That lesson has been one of the hardest for me to recognize, and I know that many people can get frustrated with God when things aren’t going well (myself included). But what we all have to remember is that it is worth all of the effort and suffering that we face in order to become the person that God wants us to be. Not only is it pleasing to God, but it should be pleasing to ourselves to go through such development so that we can prosper inwardly. To quote every sports coach ever, “no pain, no gain!”

The very best part of this verse is that God is not only with us through our hardships, but also every moment of joy! We *never* fall from his favor, and He is there for every instant.

No matter how small those joyous moments are, God is by our side celebrating, laughing, and revealing in our life and His creation.

Emma Cameron

Wednesday March 28, 2012

“THE CUP”

My friend and I, being “good Presbyterians”, found seats at a table near the back of the room for the closing Love Feast at the Christian Educator’s Conference. A waitress poured our coffee and we settled in. However, a server of the Love Feast soon came our way and asked us to move to a table closer to the speaker’s podium so that all the tables would be complete with 10 people each for the feast. My friend looked up at me and exclaimed, “But I can’t move – you see, I drank from this cup and it’s dirty!” To my, “I guess you’ll have to take it with you”, she responded, “That’s the story of my life – I drank from this cup and now I’ll have to take it with me.” I knew what she meant as she had just gone through a nasty divorce and some other personal problems.

My mind immediately raced to the beautiful anthem by Craig Courtney based on Matthew 26:36-42. The words sang in my head, “Our cup was filled with darkness. Our cup was filled with death. Christ took the cup and drank it, and gave us life, and gave us hope, gave us Himself.”

What a sacrifice there is in the words of Jesus, “My Father, let this cup pass from me; yet not my will, but Thine be done.”

There is renewal, assurance, and a sustaining peace in those words for us during this Lenten season. Lent is season for regaining faith and joy in the goodness of God’s power and for recognizing His love for each and every one of us.

Are we willing to leave our dirty cups behind and let Jesus provide us with a fresh new cup of Salvation as we walk in His footsteps during these 40 days of Lent?

Sammie Braxton

Thursday March 29, 2012

Thought for the day

Phillipians 4:19

"And my God will meet all your needs, according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

We can trust that God will always meet our needs. Whatever we need on earth He will always supply, even if it is the courage to face death as Paul did. Whatever we need in heaven He will supply. We must remember, however, the difference between our wants and our needs. Most people want to feel good and avoid discomfort or pain. We may not get all we want. By trusting in Christ, our attitudes and appetites can change from wanting everything to accepting His provision and power to live for Him.

Today may we be CONTENT AND GRATEFUL for all God has blessed us with!!!

Have a Therapeutic Thursday!

Mike Farrell - Thursday, April 28, 2011, 3:07 AM

Friday March 30, 2012

My life includes a lot of bits of information that I'm going to look at "sometime." I'm too embarrassed to go check the date on the oldest message in my gmail, because I wouldn't want to confess it here, but I know it's at the bottom of a couple hundred messages containing nice links to good articles I'm going to go read "sometime." I have a lovely green folder of things to read that just maybe I'll read on the next plane trip, and in my teaching files there's a folder labeled "Things I'm hanging onto, some of them good." This is all to explain why today, in February, I finally read the autumn newsletter from Project Mercy, a wonderful development project led by Christian Ethiopians, and found this treasure. Marta Gabre-Tsadick wrote, "The prophet Elijah must have had excellent hearing! He is recorded in I Kings 18 as being able to hear God's still, small voice. What is even more amazing is that Elijah obeyed God's voice. God told Elijah to go and I Kings 19:1 tells us that Elijah departed immediately! . . . That is the kind of hearing I want to have. I want to be able to discern what God wants from me. Equally important, I want to have the conviction and the courage to act on what I hear God telling me to do." I wonder how often God speaks to me in a still, small voice and I decide to think about it "sometime when I can focus." Lent is a good time to focus, and maybe in the process I can develop a little better skill at listening when God small voice comes instead of trying to file it under saved messages and forgetting it.

Nancy Ackles

Saturday March 31, 2012

I was talking with someone who questioned the wisdom of spending a lot of money on travel to attend mission trips to foreign countries. His point was that you could have taken the money spent on airfare and donated it instead. His preference was to focus on local missions to maximize the financial impact.

I have been thinking about this a lot and trying to put his perspective into the big picture. The more I thought about missions, the more that I realized that my role in the process is more of the beneficiary and less of the giver. In the big picture, I believe that God does not need me or my time or my money. However, it is thru His grace that He allows me to give my time and money to help others. He could do everything all by Himself, but by providing me opportunities to give, He is able to bless me and others at the same time. It is up to me to decide how many blessings that I want to receive. God does not have any interest in my money. He only cares about my giving and my connection to others.

I have always admired others who were able to give themselves the freedom that comes with giving it all away - turning the "giving meter" to 11. I still have a long way to go, in fact I am sure that I will never get there. But there is a ton of blessings and grace coming my way if I can at least move the meter a little more to the right. It must be a logarithmic scale! Local or Regional or International - I am sure it does not matter where the blessings flow. What a strange world it would be if everyone would be striving for the advancement of giving more of the best instead of acquiring more of the same.

Prayer: God, please give me the strength to overcome my fears and accept Your blessings when I give myself to your world. Amen.

Jeff Cameron

Monday April 2, 2012

Emptying, and the Season of Lent

One of the first Old Testament readings in Lent is the story of Noah's ark, from Genesis. God tells Noah to build the ark, to fill it with living things and trust that the flood is coming.

The apocalyptic event itself is something that no one, then living, had experienced. Noah had every reason to gasp in disbelief and refuse to turn his life on a dime and build the ark. The idea had to seem crazy to him. Certainly he could not be criticized for doubting if this was merely a voice in his tired and lonely mind.

Nevertheless, he did as God asked. Further, he did so in *complete trust of God*, knowing that, whatever the outcome, it was the will of God.

I think about this complete trust of God during the season of Lent.

If you are like me, you give up something during Lent; maybe sweets, fried foods, red meat or some other dietary delight. Maybe you give up a bad habit; I do that too. But, often, I do it on a bartering basis. I say, "Okay, I will give up sweets, and then *I will feel better and run farther.*" Or, "I will meditate daily, and then *I will be more peaceful and able to concentrate better.*"

When we do this, we miss the boat. Lent is not about tit-for-tat. It is about emptying ourselves of something earthly... then nothing! No waiting. No expectation. No anticipation of reward. Simply making space in our lives, and *trusting God to do what God does*. Maybe God does fill us with more peace. Maybe God does grant a sliver of enlightenment. But Lent is not a deal made with God. Lent is an opportunity for us to show God our trust, our *complete and utter trust*; the same trust an infant has that her parents will love and care for her.

When I realize this, I am immediately at peace; for I remember, like Job, that God is God, and I am not.

John Elam

Tuesday April 3, 2012

The “Big C”

No one wants to hear the “C” word. It can bring around all sorts of fear, doubt, dread and anxiety. The mind seems to run off into space and you have trouble gathering your thoughts. Like “herding cats” or “nailing jello to the wall”.

Here is a word that you do not associate with the “C” word very often – BLESSING. I truly feel that the “Big C” for me was a blessing and here are the reasons why.

The “Big C” allowed me to hear God’s voice in such clear moments in crowded places. I learned that it was not about the “Big C”. It was about what I did with the “Big C”.

God has got to have a sense of humor because he created us and I truly believe because He created me. I have always coped with crisis by looking at it from a very skewed angle. For example: loosening my hair had its advantages – while driving down the road and pulling globs of hair out and watching it roll down the highway, I knew that there was some bird condo being built somewhere with some very happy warm birds. It made me laugh. I got to decorate my head ever day... such a designers dream! It’s not about the big “C”. It’s what you do with it.

I learned how much easier it is to serve than to be served and how humbling that can be.

I met an amazing woman who told me she was “blessed with cancer” twice and was “now blessed the third time with terminal cancer” and while she was telling me this she was walking in the 3 Day Breast Cancer Walk in San Diego encouraging those around her. It’s not about the “Big C”. It’s what you do with it.

God can do anything. He can even take the “Big C” and teach you things you never thought were possible. So whenever life hands you lemons, and it will – just remember... it’s not about the lemons... it’s what you do with them.

Chris Brown

Wednesday April 4, 2012

Have you ever wondered about the many ways that God speaks to us? Through Scripture. Maybe words from a friend spoken at just the right moment. Perhaps a feeling of peace when you've made a tough decision. God can be subtle or He can be obvious when He nudges us to do His will. Even though I have "heard" God speak subtly to me many times over the years, I always want Him to be more obvious in the way He lets me know what He wants me to do. Well, last year He did just that!

It was January 2011 and I was at the Martha Bassett concert having a good time and enjoying the music – nothing big on the horizon. Mike Farrell pulled me aside and asked me to co-lead a trip to Mexico with him in July. Having been to Mexico several times, I was excited at the thought of going again and thought it would be awesome to be able to go with Mike. But co-lead? "I am not qualified to do something like that", I thought to myself. That would be scary and intimidating but I told Mike that I would pray about it and let him know. Whatever God wanted me to do I would do. "I just wish God would make His will known to me loud and clear – maybe hit me over the head with a baseball bat!", I said to Mike.

Wow! I got hit over the head alright! The next day Mike sent me the Scripture he had just read from his daily devotional and it was from Isaiah 6:8. "Then I (Isaiah) heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, here I am Lord. Send me."

Beth Cameron

Thursday April 5, 2012 – Maundy Thursday

In the summer of 2011 I went on my first trip to Mexico with ORPC. I was pretty excited about going. I remember counting down the days left in school until summer break so I could go on this mission trip I had heard so much about. I did not know what to expect so I just went into it open minded knowing God would make it a great experience for me. I was wrong, it was much better than great, it was amazing! In fact, one night at a wrap up session I shared that it was life changing for me. I'm not normally one to express my emotions, but during this trip it was impossible not to.

The first day we had a long ride into the village, you know, the kind of ride where you know you have to be there already, but really you are only half way there. When we got there the villagers were waiting to greet us and we went right into a church service as soon as we stepped out of the vans. Right away I noticed the atmosphere seemed much happier and more cheerful than at home. After the church service and a meal prepared by the village, we set up our sleeping areas and awaited the days to come.

The next morning we started the construction part of our trip. We were digging footings for their new church. The holes were a meter, by a meter, by a meter. It was hard work! We continued this for the next few mornings. One afternoon we also had VBS with the children in the village. We all met and sang songs and read Bible stories. After the stories the kids went to different stations that we had set up. I was playing with chalk with one of the boys and decided I would try to teach him a game of Tic-Tac-Toe. I drew up the board and tried to show him how to play. I speak no Spanish at all, but somehow we communicated with each other and he learned how to play. After that I was done, he caught on quickly, and I knew I had no chance. He was kicking my butt every time! Then his friends started coming over and he showed them how to play, before we knew it a bunch of kids were playing Tic-Tac-Toe. This really stuck out to me because neither one of us knew what the other was saying, but we could still have a great time together! God was truly at work!

Another thing that I'll never forget was when we were worshipping at one of the villages. A Tzeltal man was praying after he had collected the offering, I couldn't understand his prayer but noticed that he had started crying while he was praying. I later found out that Tzeltal men do not normally cry and show their emotions in public. He was saying a prayer of thanksgiving and was so touched by us being there with them that he was crying. This is when I realized that they were so grateful for our presence with them and I knew we were doing much more than helping them build a church.

In Philippians 2:4 it says, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." I realized this summer just how true this is. For I spent a wonderful week in Mexico, not for a glamorous vacation, but to help others. Because of this it has made me a better person and the experience was truly life changing. I will do it again in a heartbeat if I ever get the chance.

Chase Kubis
Mexico Sunday Sermon

Friday April 6, 2012 – Good Friday

"Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat—I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you?"

Luke 9:23-25 (The Message)

In my high school civics class, we talk about counter-culture all the time. Just as my class works hard to learn how to become law-abiding, productive, tax-paying citizens, we also celebrate those who have gone against the status quo to right wrongs and build a better society: founders of the American Revolution, Progressives and labor unions fighting against industrial tycoons, students protesting against established segregation laws. The stories are inspiring, as they often feature Americans willing to sacrifice their "lives...fortunes...and sacred honor" (Declaration of Independence) to bring about change.

Entering lent, I am faced with this notion of counter-culture in the life of Christ's church. Lent, unlike any other time, has me facing not only my sinful nature in the most concentrated way. It also forces me to deal with the question of how much the American culture affects me versus how much I, as a follower of Christ, might affect the culture. I find discomfort when answering the question in my mind that I am hardly counter-culture but rather just one of the many perpetuating the same ol' rat race that is surely not doing much to build God's Kingdom.

So, what to do? I look to Paul's letter to Philippians that my buddies and I studied this past week:

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care— then do me a favor: Agree with each

other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.
Philippians 2:1-4 (The Message)

It seems as if we can just start here, we will spark something counter-culture indeed. Can you imagine ten strong living this out in a work place, fifty strong living this out in church, a thousand strong living this out in Oak Ridge, ten thousand strong living this out in North Carolina? Talk about a counter-culture movement for the history books!

Seems simple, but obviously not easy. To be counter-culture means to rebel against cultural norms and acceptable societal traits and to risk certain loss. But, in Christ, we have the ultimate model of counter-culture to serve as our source of inspiration, wisdom, and undying grace. And we can be certain that though the loss of wealth, power, and prestige may seem great, we have much to gain—our own "true selves".

Scott Bennett

Saturday April 7, 2012

Mission and Service, Finding Your Local Opportunity

So maybe you aren't feeling called to be a "full-time missionary". Maybe your budget restricts you from travel internationally. Could be that your commitments to your family (young children, teenage children or aging parents) keeps you from serving on a regional mission trip. Never fear, God equips those He calls and He is calling us to serve others.

Imagine for a moment that you move to a land half a world away from your home. Picture being in a place surrounded by millions of people that speak a different language and whose appearance is different than you as well. Then consider the fact that most have never heard of the hope that we have in Jesus. As you can surmise from these details, Shanghai China is not Guilford County.

I never realized the blessings of living in the "Bible Belt" until I truly became the minority. Christians make up 3-4% of those practicing religion in China. To put it in local terms, assuming 500,000 people in Guilford County there would be only 15,000-20,000 Christians. Through a computer search of Christians in Guilford County, the Presbyterian Church alone makes up about 16,000, so you know the number of believers is far greater in our area of NC.

So what can we learn? If our area is an area filled with Christians, then everyone should feel welcomed and well loved, Right? There should be no need that isn't already attended to by the faith community. Yet after my experiences overseas, I would argue that welcoming and serving "aliens" (those from foreign lands) is an area where you might find a way to serve our Lord and those around you.

Whether it is welcoming refugees by helping to coordinate efforts to meet their needs and help them feel settled. Or maybe it is helping an expat family here on a 2-3 year assignment from Sweden or Switzerland. If they have children, you can bet the US is different than

home for them. In each case, the English language might be their 2nd or 3rd language, so communication might be a challenge. Reading a map or street signs in a foreign language is no easy task. Finding products and services in a foreign land can be a full time job!

So use your networks to find out from local companies and schools about families that are "transplanted" here from foreign lands and reach out to them. Offer them a kind word, a meal or an opportunity to worship. Showing God's love will take such little effort on your part and make a world of difference to them feeling the Lord's presence were they are "planted" now.

A Paul writes in Acts 20:24, "However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." Are you seeking to know the task the Lord has set before you? Are your words and actions extending God's grace to those around you? Pray that you will see where you can serve Him today!

Beth Weikel

Sunday April 8, 2012 – Easter Sunday

Sam the Man

I remember seeing him that day, not for the first time, but for the first opportunity to actually look at him. I had caught glimpses of him in the classroom where he would normally spend the time while his mother would perform her role at the church. But each time the woman that was taking care of him would see me, we would make eye contact, I would smile and keep moving, but always wanting just an additional few seconds to try to get a better look. But this time, it was different, this time I could analyze Sam without constraint, at least for a few minutes. He was just standing there, diminutive in stature, with a mostly blank look on his face, not moving at all, not reacting to his surroundings, just standing there. This time there was no one actually there with him, or so it seemed. There was no one fending off my inquiring stare, no one to protect him from my scrutiny. Others who were walking through the area would give him a wide berth, some would acknowledge him, but most would just walk on by. But this time, I stopped to take a look.

So what did I get for my few seconds of staring? The realization that in many ways he was the most intimidating person I had encountered in a long time, or at least the most baffling. As is so often the norm, I tried to create some kind of context for him. I knew so little about him; did not even know what term was used to describe his “problem”. I knew his mother from our various encounters in the church, but this was a topic that I would not have the confidence to discuss with her, fearing I would be intruding into an area in her life that was off limits. Then, as now, I was heavily involved in church and church leadership. I taught, preached and hopefully lived a true Christian witness. But when it came to Sam, I like most other people did not look for the hand of God in his presence did not see God working in our lives through him. All I saw was a person with major issues, severe limitations. And then I asked why? Why, because we “normal” people need to have answers, need to understand.

Fast forward a number of years. I have the opportunity to observe Sam any time I want, for as long as I want. But now I see him in a different light. I know that it is not a blank look on his face; he is actually moving and reacting to his surroundings, communicating continuously, just doing it in his own context, not mine. He is still an enigma. You cannot always assume anything from one day to the next.

Sam’s presence can be like God’s presence in our lives. We don’t necessarily see it when it is there, when we do, we do not recognize it for what it is. We can be intimidated, confused and even angry when it sometimes forces itself upon us. But in the end, without faith, we will never begin to accept what a blessing it is in our life. Faith will force us to rethink the context that we impose on everything in life, making us learn to accept that which cannot be explained. Sometimes we must just take things at face value.

Many times Sam appears to be in another world, sometimes he seems angry and often he is obviously happy. If you have the confidence to watch closely, you may be able to see the little hand gesture that is his way of saying goodbye. No doubt he has limitations, but most are imposed on him by the “normal” world. Sam is all of this and more, but at all times Sam is a true blessing from God. Similarly, if you have the confidence, if you look closely, you will see the hand of God working in your life. Just have faith.

Richard Cram